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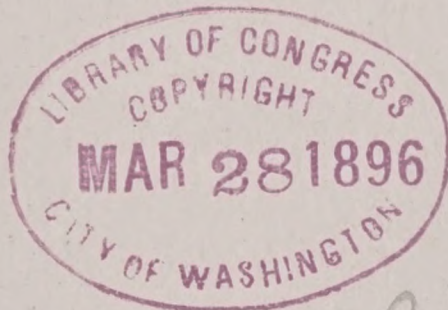
Easter-Lilies

By Mrs. A. A. McKay

Greatmond, Surry Va.

A Quaint Little Story

An Easter Offering



19322 B 21



The Peter Paul Book Company

Buffalo . . . 1896

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To
.. That Beautiful Sisterhood ..

the sweet women, who, year
after year, dispense God's
blessing of flowers
to the sick and
afflicted,

“The Poor”

of our cities, I affectionately
dedicate this little
. book .

EASTER-LILIES.

THE STORY OF A CHILD.

THE high, narrow window, which opened back on hinges let a bit of heaven into the dreary little room. This curtainless window always gave the two dwellers there, as in a tiny setting, glimpses of heaven—storm-cast or cloudless, moonlit or starlit—a picture which they watched as the one rare thing in their shabby, shut-in home high up under the roof.

Little Effie, in happier times, as the twilight fell, and her mother was gone to take the shirts, used to climb to the high casement, and from her perilous perch on the narrow sill—fearless as any wild bird alighted there—watch the lamps far down below come out over the city. And then with eyes turned upward, fascinated by the millions of upper lights in the wide, blue dome above, sit wondering in childish awe at the vast height with its glory of stars. Or, with steadfast gaze turned outward along the far, dim horizon, search for the shining ship with its golden sails, which she was sure would bring her father back to them out of the deep.

This morning the narrow patch of blue in its dingy setting was divinely fair, with now and then a fleecy cloud floating across it.

The invalid had begged little Effie to throw the casement open and let in the air.

“Open it wide, dear, as wide as you can get it,” she had feebly implored, her large sunken eyes fixed on the little heartsick nurse with such a look, that though the hands which had been so hot were now cold and clammy, and her fears made the child’s knees tremble under her—for there had been a dash of rain in the early morning—she sprang to do her mother’s bidding.

“That is sweet,” came weakly, but with infinite satisfaction from the bed; and the poor emaciated creature lay and drank in the fresh humid breath of early spring, as it swelled into the little room, inflating and sweetening its heavy, feverish odors.

Then she went on in a wandering, half conscious way, her voice heavenly sweet to the little watcher who was close beside the bed again:

“It must be near Easter. I wonder if the lilies, tall and slim, in the old garden are peeping over the wall—sweet, white faces all in a row—looking for Elizabeth and me—their ‘sister-lilies’ Jamie used to say. Who will gather them this Easter-tide? Jamie’s not come—and we cannot get to the old place—little Effie and I.”

The child’s heart of late had a way of stopping for a brief moment or two, and then bounding up with a great throb leaving her with a dizzy, far-away feeling. It had just served her this trick, and the weak voice sounded miles away. “Elizabeth and I used to gather baskets full of them, rain or shine—little we cared, so joyous

and glad were we that the Easter-time was come—we loved the dash of rain in our flushed faces as we ran across the village-green and burst into the old chapel where all the youths and maidens were glorifying the grim chancel, and lighting up the pillars and galleries with clusters and garlands and festoons of flowers. Well we knew ours would be the loveliest of them all, for Jamie had brought the bulbs from over the seas when but a sailor lad, and we two over-fond girls had planted them, and nursed and sheltered them till they bloomed, Jamie said, like they bloomed over the sea.”

Her hands were folded peacefully on her breast. A blissful hush fell on her. The memory of other days, the warm, soft air stirring in at the open window, the little patch of tender cerulean on which her sunken eyes were fixed, seemed to lull her.

The child roused herself and hung over the bed. Again the feeble voice wandered on.

“And Jamie was always there, for he managed to get anchored at our little seaport town, without fail at the Easter-time. He was so supple and so strong—full many a time he had swung to a spar in the stormiest ocean—that none but his good arm must hang the high garlands; wrapping them up about the pillars, and looping them from beam to beam—laughing and gay, with now and then a cheery word down. And sweet Elizabeth—she would answer back and smile, but I would never a look, though I knew his kind eyes were seeking down for an upward glance from the ones he

called 'the sweetest eyes.' I worried his patient soul from day to day and from time to time, till I could myself hold out no longer. One heavenly decoration time we stood at the door—the dim church lay behind us in its Easter garment of flowers"—she panted now and then for breath, a pale tint coming on the sunken cheek, a kind of ecstasy fluttering in the feeble tones.

"The others had all gone—but Elizabeth had lingered behind for a few more chords of the glad hymn she was to give us on the morrow. It was dusk, and the old church looked like a dream of beauty in the dim light, and the odor of our lilies in the vast place was faint and sweet. We stood together waiting—Jamie and I only—the music—the place—the hour—the odors—I looked up in Jamie's face—I was about to fly, but he gathered me close—close with his strong arm, and said: 'Effe, tomorrow you will be my bride,' and I could no more have gainsaid him there than I could have stopped back the wild rush of love that made me hold my lips up for the first kiss he had ever offered me. And 'tomorrow,' in the midst of the lilies, standing about in their tall pitchers, and strewn on the altar-cloth and thick within the chancel rail, I was his happy bride."

The child was hanging over her, thrilled with the sweetness of the story. "But child!" she suddenly cried out in a high, quavering key, starting the child's heart back in terror, "my sister, my bridesmaid," her eyes agonized and wild, "my sweet Elizabeth—in robes

like mine, and some said fairer than I—lay amongst the lilies, fallen prone before the ‘Amen’ was said.”

A moment she panted, and then with anguished longing she gazed up in the child’s face and said:

“Effie, my little girl, can you not get me some Easter-lilies? I will do without the broth.” O, the pathos of it!

All night long she had pleaded for her lilies—startling the tired child by her side, awaking and alarming her, crying out: “The hedge! Where are my white darlings?” and moaning, “the resurrection morn and no lilies!” And little Effie, wide awake at last—frightened and trembling and palpitating—was pondering and yearning over the question, Where in all that big city could she find her lilies? Where? Weak and longing over it—lying there almost shivering beside the hot, quick breathing. Where? Smothering her sobs—her little heart almost bursting with it. Where? A want so simple and yet a problem so mighty for this child to solve.

Dear little Effie, heaven-inspired women had not yet instituted that sweet charity—flowers to the sick and afflicted—which might have reached even you!

“Effie Connely! Do you expect me to wait all day for *you*?

The shrill call startled the child into a frenzied haste.

“May I not close the window now, dearest mother?” she asked, with hurried and breathless entreaty. “I

must go." She gazed with agonized scrutiny down in the half-closed eyes.

"Why should you shut it, sweet? We always have the morning air, Elizabeth."

A low wail escaped the child. "I have just wakened, and I am not half rested — the hill-side was so steep — but the berries were luscious. Jamie's hands were like blood" — the child shivered — "after I made him cap them. Patient soul, how worried he looked, but he never stopped till he had finished *every one*. And you were worried too, Elizabeth, sweet, I could see it in your eyes. But hark! Is not that mother's voice calling us?" A vague, vacant smile hovered about the wan face. O, why must she leave her!

"Effie Connely, I'll be off without ye in less than ten minits!"

The child's heart rose fiercely. She wished she might strike her little clenched fist across the mouth that sent the shrill call into the still room.

But the threat nerved her. In desperate haste she fumbled under the bed, and half stooping, put on a pair of over-large shoes, tying them tightly about her fleshless ankles — hot tears running down — hers were gone, and her tender bare feet might not get over the rough pavement fast enough for the relentless task-mistress who day after day urged her forward with words that stung like goads.

"What's cum over ye, the last days? It's as much as it's wuth to git ye along. D'ye think I'm goin' ter

let ye stay up there doin' nothin', day in an' day out, an' me be satisfied with *drivin'* ye a half a mile ur more, *jes' ter say* ye're payin' yer rent a-marketin' fur me? I'll turn ye out—that's what I'll do—I've no notion uv puttin' up with yere laz'ness. Git on! Git on! Move like ye're got sum life in ye—and don't drap that basket."

The little arm almost breaking under its load, for Mrs. Sloan was a vender of food to her tenants, held bravely to its burden, but the tiny feet with their clumsy protection got along poorly.

And Effie lagged sadly this morning. She was looking in all the windows—shabby, tawdry windows, not likely to be displaying fresh, grand Easter-lilies—but her eager, longing eyes searched them all.

"What air ye a-gapin' in the winders fur? How much money hev ye got ter spend?"

But the taunt did not trouble her. She did not care for the goads to-day. If only she might find the lilies! She would beg for them, she would get on her knees for them—she would plead, she would implore—surely they would give a poor child—

"Git on! Git on!" The goads did not sting this morning. All feeling seemed gone except the longing for the lilies.

She trudged up the stairs—two flights—with her heavy burden. She put it down, and looking up in the hard old face bravely, made a plaintive appeal:

"Mrs. Sloan, could I get Easter-lilies at a church?"

"Easter-lilies, indeed! I b'l'ave the gal's gone stark crazy! G'long up stairs an' ten' to yer proud, lazy mammy," and she sent the child spinning across the floor.

And now it was impossible for the child to drag her clogged feet up the steps—she was sure it was the shoes. She sat down to pull them off. Her heart was throbbing wildly again after that first fierce bound and sickening stop when everything seemed miles away from her. She fumbled with the shoes—she broke the string and freed herself—she felt like flying to the little room up under the roof, away from the hard old woman beneath, and all the full big city below, where nothing was hers,—out of which she could get nothing for her sick mother—not even a bunch of lilies!

Passionate with grief, worn and exhausted, she climbed the long, steep stairways.

The room was still as death. Her mother slept. Smothering a sob little Effie laid her face close beside the one on the pillow.

She thought wearily that she ought to get herself something to eat; but she was never hungry now. She had been at first, when the food gave out, and she could only buy a little, day by day, with the pennies which seemed to go so fast; but now she did not care to eat.

Only to find the lilies! this great longing swelled her heart almost to bursting—and to sleep and to rest—this was all the little soul yearned for now.

She roused herself and crept noiselessly up, closing the window—not before she had stood for a moment or two clinging to the narrow sill to steady herself, gazing down and out over the grand, full city, teeming with life and power—chimney and spire and dome steaming and glinting—motion and beauty everywhere—as she had seen it a hundred times from that one sweet spot in her poor world. She knew its beautiful streets, she knew its palaces, she knew its grand display windows—its fruits and its flowers—and she knew there was nothing there for her! She gazed up in the wide expanse of dazzling blue with its midday sun blazing down in her face, blinding her with its splendor and light. Were the tall Easter-lilies blooming under it in “the little seaport town?”

Miserable and dizzy and heartsick she climbed down, and went back and laid herself again beside the sleeping mother, putting her poor little face still closer to the one on the pillow.

Hours after she started up frightened to find the twilight in the room.

A sudden great hope flashed up as the mother opened her eyes and said:

“My little one, I had such a sweet dream while we slept;” her voice was stronger than it had been for days. “I thought the window was open, and I lay and drank in deep draughts of spring air, like the breath of an Easter morn; and it seemed that I was back in the

little seaport town, home again, gathering lilies with Elizabeth, for—”

She stopped suddenly and was in a deep sleep, breathing heavily. Almost as suddenly she roused again, and turning herself, said imperatively, as if there must be no further delay:

“Child, go gather my lilies. Place the stand—fill the tall china pot full of the long stalks with the white faces bending above—and fill my *hands* full—*full like I filled Elizabeth's.*” An electric thrill went through the child. “She looked so calm and happy, but now *I know* that her heart broke that morning in the old chapel when I was his happy—” She gasped for breath, she raised herself on the pillow.

“Open, Effie—open it wide! Do you not see that I am dying for air! Open—and—bring—me—my—lilies.” It was a whisper—but a trumpet call to the child.

She sprang to the wooden chair. Tottering she fumbled for the latch—then she flung the casement wide.

And she did not once glance down where the grand full moon had just come up, immense and pale golden, far out over the houses, nor up at the early stars that looked down in her little terror-stricken face, and alas, for the ship with the golden sails! She staid not a moment, only to stoop and grope for the shoes, but she put them quickly back again, and went swiftly out of the room.

She sped down the steps. A ghastly instinct told her that a merciless phantom was hurrying her, which delayed not for love's fleetest messengers to do their swiftest missions.

Down five flights of steps! Winged with fright and hope — out into the night — borne along by a mighty desire to answer that last appeal.

Even in those poor quarters signs of holiday cheer greeted her, but she sped by the detaining hand of some comrade, who would have swung her into the circle, and breaking frantically away fled along the uneven pavement. As she got further up into the city she went even more swiftly, the pavements smoother, the lights from the windows brilliant. She reached a lofty building, spire and dome far up tipped with moonlight. Tall stained windows aglow with light.

"Christ is risen! Christ is risen!" The grand peal of music died away.

The door stood open, some one was coming out. The child ran up the steps, and without pausing a moment, went swiftly in. The astonished woman who was passing out, turned and slowly went back into the church, and stood in a kind of awe, looking and listening.

Those decorating the church, startled, turned too, looking and listening.

The child had flown up the aisle, and was standing, panting and almost breathless, her rapturous gaze fixed on lilies! Great waxen Easter-lilies!

She laid her poor little hands on her wildly-beating heart—she tried to speak—once—twice—thrice—and then God gave her voice for her petition.

“Give me lilies! Grand and beautiful ladies, give me lilies! O, haste—a whole armful—for the stand, and to fill her sweet hands!” The plaintive wail went through the church. This was no acting, nor yet the craze of an over-excited child. The women gazed and stood speechless.

“Lilies! Beautiful ladies, give me lilies! Easter-lilies!” The mighty pathos of human woe smote them. Hurriedly, eagerly they filled her trembling, outstretched arms with superb bunches of the flowers she begged. The sallow, wan face looking thinner and more pinched by contrast with the healthy, white-faced beauties.

“And now she’ll have them!” Her rapture thrilled them, “she’s called for them the night through, but we had no money—and I—did not know where to find them! Thank you, sweet ladies!” Her gratitude brought tears.

She went again like a wraith, down the aisle.

Suspicious as it had seemed awhile before—the little flying figure with its wild strained face, shabby garments and bare head—more suspicious still now, the same figure with the grand cluster of lilies hugged to its bosom, in desperate haste to get over the distance, only pausing now and then in dire necessity for breath. But no one stopped her.

The children still making merry in the soft evening air and silvery moonlight,—stood back suddenly still, as they saw the child returning with her strange burden of gleaming, odorous flowers; and they let her pass—never plucking at one of them as they swayed and nodded about the little set face with its distended eyes and thin, parted lips.

When she reached the five-story tenement house the child stopped, utterly dismayed before the stupendous old pile. It had never loomed up so before. It had never towered so awfully toward heaven before! As she gazed helplessly up, panting and palpitating, and quivering in every limb, it seemed to touch the gay stars that flashed above it—which had always looked so far away from her out of the little window high up there under the roof.

The phantom hurried her in. The steps! Dizzy and confused, her knees smote under her—how should she ever reach that little room close up under the stars?

The phantom hurried her on. One flight—two flights—wearily toiling. The long corridors seemed uneven, and to give way beneath her feet—she stumbled almost headlong to the floor, but recovering herself with a mighty effort, struggled on.

The steps again! Up and up she toiled—the breath of the lilies dandling about her distended nostrils making a deathly sickness—but she hugged them the closer to her bursting heart.

Only one flight more. Something lent wings to the sinking frame—and suddenly she seemed borne to the top and into the little room.

The moonlight down through the wide-open window made a silvery radiance along the bed, and on the straight motionless lines along the cover, and over the still face lying so placidly on the pillow.

One agonized glance—and then, as the child stood beside the bed, the angels of God opened Heaven for her.

The small, thin hands relaxed; the poor little arms fell apart—their freightage of love unladen on the mother's breast—and the tired child sank to rest, her head pillowed among the lilies.

So the old, hard woman found her on that gloriously bright anniversary of the Resurrection Morn, while the bells were chiming over the city, pealing for glad worship and thanksgiving, when, after calling in vain, angry and vengeful, she stood on the threshold.

Dead! Two white, emaciated, still faces. Grand Easter-lilies adorning the bed, their odor arising like incense. And down through the narrow window, the all-illuminating sun pouring a light divine.

THE END.





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